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Pushpa Sundar

Protest through theatre

—*The Indian experience*

Theatre, understood to include both dramatic literature and dramatic performance, has long been used as a means of expressing and communicating protest against injustice, exploitation and oppression by those in power, as well as for creating new perceptions of social reality. Theatre can be a more potent form of protest than books or films because, though the latter may reach a larger audience, they lack the live contact of theatre which makes for more intimate and intense communication. Theatre not only makes an audience conscious of the wrongs being protested against, but also arouses it to immediate action.

The term 'protest theatre' is often used as a synonym for political theatre, but it has a wider scope. Socially concerned theatre may raise consciousness about social ills for which individuals, and not the State, may be collectively responsible; thus, it may not be aimed at political authority at all. In this article both political and social protests through theatre are considered.

While theatre concerned with social criticism has been active in many countries through the ages, (e.g. Ibsen's *Doll's House* which raised a protest against women's position in society), political theatre, dealing with political ideas and concepts usually in an attempt to attack or support a particular political position, has become popular largely since the Russian Revolution. Sometimes protest theatre merely raises certain issues, explores certain problems and asks certain questions; at other times, it may attempt to change the beliefs and opinions of the spectators, ultimately seeking political and social action based on these changes. But the essence of protest theatre is that it is directed towards the power of an authority—political, religious, or social. Even when it does not seek to change beliefs or exhort to action, protest theatre is valuable

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in giving intellectual and emotional support to the already converted. As such it can be an important force in political and social change.[1]

Political theatre, though generally opposed to the Government and its policies, may not always be so, and it can be conservative as well as liberal, for the Government as well as against it. In the post-revolutionary period in Russia, theatre was used to educate the workers in the Marxist doctrines and was performed in factories and streets. It exemplified conservative political theatre; it protested the capitalist system and values and was not anti-establishment. These plays were aesthetically poor and consisted of short episodes, substituting theme for plot and used few stage props. Since then, this type of theatre, labelled 'agitprop' or 'street theatre', has become a genre of its own. However, not all protest theatre is of this variety. Serious political theatre of the highest aesthetic standards also exists, of which Brecht's plays (*Mother Courage, The Caucasian Chalk Circle,* etc.) are the supreme example.

From Russia the political theatre movement spread to Europe and USA in the 1920s. The thirties saw widespread and hectic political theatre activity in these countries, and since World War II, the notion of 'cultural work', with theatre as a major tool for the political education of the working class, has been part of the organising strategies of every movement and party of the Left.[2] But the modern anti-establishment theatre really came into its own in the 1960s, reflecting the radical student and allied movements in the contemporary world, often directed against dictatorships or unpopular government policies such as the Vietnam War. In Russia, in the 1970s, theatre became an outlet for the expression of ideas and the airing of dissatisfaction, still largely excluded from the printed page. One of the major unofficial themes in recent Soviet theatre has been that of censorship and freedom of expression. In the Philippines and Latin America too, theatre has been a significant weapon of protest against dictatorships. Though, inevitably, protest often attracts censorship, especially in repressive regimes, ways of bypassing censorship are nothing new in theatre. Good actors are always able—through gestures, pause and intonation—to go beyond the letter of the text to convey what the censor has forbidden. Only when censorship becomes oppressive does it kill theatre activity completely. Politically-oriented theatre exists in almost every country today; the degree of political inclination depends on the degree of censorship.[3]

In what follows, the Indian experience with protest is surveyed with the intention of illustrating why protest theatre came into being, why it is active in some periods and in some regions rather than in others, who the *dramatis personae* of protest theatre are, what is the effect of such theatre on governments, and on social and political change, and whether protest and theatre are two contradictory terms in the context of aesthetics.

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Looking back we see that though the spirit of non-conformity is quite ancient in India, being embodied in her mystical traditions, protest was largely embodied in literature, both oral and written, and not in the form of theatre. (Buddhism and the Bhakti movement of the Medieval years were, in a sense, also protest movements against Brahmanical doctrines and the tyranny of caste, creed and ritualism). Protest through theatre has been significant only in three periods: (a) 1870–1930, (b) 1940–47, and (c) 1960–80. In the first two periods, protest was directed against an alien rule as well as social evils in Indian society; in the last, theatre gave voice to discontent regarding political corruption, economic poverty and social oppression in independent India. The form of theatre too differed in the pre- and post-Independence periods: in the former, protest theatre was largely of the traditional Western proscenium theatre type; whereas in the latter period, it reflected the new influences that had affected world theatre, and used the agitprop street genre extensively, though not exclusively.

Though theatre has existed in India for at least 2500 years, it would not have accommodated protest, political or social theatre, in the classical period of Sanskrit drama because of the conventions of dramaturgy by which it was bound. These conventions, codified in the seminal work on dramaturgy, the *Natyasastra* (approximately second century BC to second century AD, stated that the main object of drama is to instruct through amusement. Though advise was to be given through the play based on the actions of men, both good and bad, the drama was strictly to be a diversion to people weighed down by sorrow, fatigue, grief or bad luck. It was to be a rest for the mind and body. While during the course of the play, its action might arouse certain passions or moods called *rasas* such as love, anger, disgust or fear, yet, at the end of the play, the injunction was to leave the audience rested and peaceful. Protest was, thus, inconceivable.

Sanskrit drama declined and disappeared around the tenth century AD, though the folk tradition has continued uninterrupted till the present day. No indigenous Muslim drama developed in India during Mughul rule, largely because stage representation is contrary to Islamic doctrine. It was not till the firm establishment of the British Raj by 1818 that theatre was revived in India. Used initially only to entertain, it later became a vehicle of protest against the political domination of the British and the social ills of Indian society. The vital role that theatre played in the social and political awakening of India should not be underestimated, for in a society where literacy was low and the oral tradition strong, theatre was a potent force for change. Films and radio were to reach the masses only in the 1930s and 1940s by which time the freedom struggle was well advanced.

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As the British rule stabilised in the early years of the nineteenth century, the British built playhouses and staged plays for their own diversion. The educated and rich Indians in the Presidency towns, especially the Bengalis of Calcutta, were quick to emulate the British plays, though most of the early performances in Bangla were in private houses. By the early 1840s, however, there was a demand for public Bangla theatre and it stimulated a new breed of writers and producers. The first original play in Bangla, which could legitimately be labelled a protest play, was *Kulin Kulasarvaswa* by Ram Narayan Tarkaratna, written in 1853 and performed in 1857. It highlighted evil social customs such as polygamy amongst the Kulin Brahmans of Bengal, marriage of very young girls to very old men lest they remain spinsters, and men amassing wealth from dowries through multiple marriages. It was the first play to indirectly question the supremacy of the Brahman and the rigid caste system. It was followed by other social satires, the most noted of which were the plays of Michael Madhusudan Dutt. In plays such as *Buro Shaliker Ghade Rom* (New Feathers on Old Bird's Neck), he exposed the hypocrisies of the orthodox Brahmans as well as the practices of the newly Westernised. However, by and large, theatre concentrated on non-controversial translations of English plays or mythological stories from India's past.[4]

In the meantime, urban theatre was also taking root in Maharashtra on the west coast, with plays being produced in regional languages such as Parsi, Marathi, Gujarati and Urdu. While the Parsi, Gujarati and Urdu language theatres were largely confined to Bombay, the Marathi theatre developed outside it and later came to Bombay. Unlike the Marathi stage, however, the other three theatres were to develop into purely entertaining, commercial theatres, since their playwrights were usually not men of great education or literary attainments. Initially, the Marathi stage too concentrated on plays with music and on mythological themes, but later became more socially committed.

However, it was not till the 1870s that the Bengali and Marathi theatres started showing any inclination to question the established political order. After 1870 the situation changed as the positive and negative aspects of British rule began to be deeply felt. The early cautious attitude of the British had given way to a more confident and aggressive imperialism. The introduction of English education, establishment of the judicial system, and extension of administration and commerce had brought into existence an English-educated, urban middle class which was alienated both from its own cultural roots and from the rural masses. The aspirations of this class to enter the higher echelons of government service were denied by restrictive practices since imperialist trade and industrial and revenue policies had impoverished India and narrowed

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employment opportunities elsewhere. Education and exposure to new political ideas in the West, coupled with growing economic distress and political repression, led to rising political consciousness, especially in Bengal where their effects were most commonly felt. The Partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905 and the consequent *Swadeshi* movement, which initiated a mass boycott of British goods, increased political tension.

At the same time, the inquiry of scholars and intellectuals into India's past led to an awakening of pride in India's heritage and a renewal of the self-confidence which had been shattered by the British political domination. The cultural renaissance resulting in a great efflorescence of literature, drama and art, contributed to, and drew strength from, the political awakening. The search for roots and a desire for political self-determination, in turn, highlighted weaknesses in Indian society such as gross inequalities and injustices caused by the rigidities and hierarchies of the caste system, and the indignities suffered by women (*purdah*, child marriage, denial of education, and prohibition of marriage for widows). This awareness led to various social and religious reform movements.

Indian theatre grew and matured against this background. It mirrored both the discontent and the cultural efflorescence. Between 1857 and 1870, many new plays were written and produced, harking back to ancient glory on the one hand and protesting against contemporary conditions on the other. Established literary figures and thinkers became associated with the stage and explored political and social problems.

In Bengal the first play that could be included in the genre of political protest was *Neel Darpan* (Mirror of Indigo) concerned with the exploitation of Bengali indigo workers by the British planters. The ensuing political storm led to the imprisonment of its translator, Reverend Long. It also led to a spate of other dramas protesting other injustices. *Samudra Darpan*, (Mirror of the Sea) protested the exploitation of seamen by British shipowners. *Chakar Darpan* (Mirror to Tea) was a cry against the exploitation of tea workers in Assam. *Gaekwar Darpan* focussed upon the harrassment and vindictive treatment meted out to the Maharaja of Baroda by falsely implicating him on a charge of poisoning a British official. Of poor artistic and literary merit, these dramas are nevertheless important as the first efforts at political protest through theatre.

The staging of *Neel Darpan* in 1873 by the National Theatre of Calcutta, and the staging of other plays including *Gajadananda O Yubaraj* (Gaja and the Prince), which makes fun of the visit of the Prince of Wales to the home of a prominent Bengali lawyer, attracted the attention of the Government and led to efforts to suppress the rising expression of nationalism in cultural activities. Beginning with individual arrests of actors, the Government finally promulgated the Dramatic Performances

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Control Ordinance on 29 February, 1876. It forbade dramatic performances which were scandalous, defamatory, seditious, obscene or otherwise prejudicial to the public interest. This led to protests from concerned Indian citizens. The British Indian Association of Calcutta, representing English and Indian professionals, voiced the apprehension that:

> In a country like this, where the influence of public opinion is feeble, where the executive have a wide discretion, where the rulers have no critical knowledge of the language of the ruled and where national literature is just reviving, the enormous arbitrary power proposed to be vested in the executive officers by the Bill may be converted into a fearful engine of oppression, and may prove disastrous to the liberty and literature of the people.[5]

The Indian newspapers were equally critical.

However, all the protests were of no avail and the Ordinance was ratified into an Act in 1876. Its use did not end with the achievement of Independence; it continued to be invoked for curbing dissent until it was struck down by the Allahabad High Court in 1954 as being *ultra vires* the Constitution.[6]

If the Act was expected to end protests, such hopes were dashed for it merely led to more imaginative ways of conveying protests. After 1890 historical plays couched in an allegorical form or a legendary setting became the vogue for voicing political protest so that the political message could escape censorship. In Bengal, Girish Chandra Ghose (actor, writer and manager of the Great National Theatre of Calcutta, and one of the first Greats of Bengali theatre) wrote and produced *Siraj-ud-daula* (1906) and *Mir Kasim* (1907), both dealing with historical figures who had suffered British oppression. *Siraj-ud-daula* dramatises the corruption, bribery and blackmail that surrounded the emergence of the British as a political power in India. Though the portrayal was of an historical and not a contemporary situation, the audience nevertheless got the message; so did the authorities and the play was banned.

Another playwright who explored the past history of India in relation to the pressures and tensions of contemporary Bengal was D.L. Roy. In *Rana Pratap* (1905), *Mewar Patan* (The Fall of Mewar, 1908) and *Shah Jahan* (1908) he dramatised the struggle of the Rajputs to preserve their independence. Instead of engaging in diatribes against the British, he questioned the possibilities of Indian nationalism, observing that Indians could be politically free only if they could abandon their feudal values and moribund social priorities. He pointed out that the British were not the only oppressors; there was exploitation within the society due to the rigid caste system. Not surprisingly, therefore, Roy's plays were not

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popular in his time.[7]

Even the popular folk theatre of Bengal, the *Jatra*, did not lag behind in political protest. Mukund Das, its most famous artist, used the *Jatra* form to preach nationalism through historical plays.

In Maharashtra too, the boiling political atmosphere in the country was mirrored on the stage, especially by Khadilkar, a disciple of the fiery Lokmanya Tilak. *Thorla Madhavrao Peshwa* (The Elder Peshwa) indirectly commented on the Mutiny of 1857. *Keechak Vadha* (1907) interpreted a mythological theme in the light of contemporary politics, and was directed against Lord Curzon. This play was immediately banned for several years.

With Gandhi's assumption of leadership of the Congress in the late 1920s, a new cultural, political and social movement started. Politically these were very turbulent years, with Gandhi launching the non-cooperation movement and the Satyagraha movement of 1929, followed by the Quit India Movement of 1942. The ruthless repression that followed frightened the theatre in India. By and large it abstained from incurring the displeasure of the rulers. One or two attempts were made by groups of intellectuals to write and perform new plays, conveying the message of newly-awakened nationalism but they were suppressed. Generally, more plays were written than performed; texts were proscribed and performances banned. Amateur theatre, largely the creation of the educated, also suffered. Attempts by students to organise troupes and to produce historical plays were crushed by the State.[8] One of the few who continued to protest against the political situation in the 1930s, was Manmatha Ray of Bengal who dramatised Hindu legends by selecting episodes that highlighted political problems. His *Karagar* (Prison) dramatises the birth of Lord Krishna in prison. Its allegorical significance was not lost on the Bengal audience of the 1930s when Bengal prisons were full of political prisoners detained for their involvement in Gandhi's civil disobedience movement. *Karagar* was banned.[9]

The end of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth century witnessed a quickening pace of social protest in Maharashtra. G.B. Deval wrote *Sharda* (1899) to protest against the custom of rich old men marrying young brides, and Gadkari's *Ekach Pyala* (Only One More) catalogued the evils of alcoholism. However, protest in Maharashtra and also in Bengal was an urban middle-class phenomena. In terms of neither personnel nor content did it bring the lower castes or the rural poor within its purview.

After the stagnation of the 1930s, theatre as a vehicle of protest was to come alive again only in the 1940s with the emergence of Marxism as a new force on the Indian scene. The collapse of Gandhi's second civil disobedience movement and the worldwide depression drew the educated

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middle-class youth, in search of a more productive political philosophy and a more effective technique of fighting the imperial power, towards the Communist party. The Marxist influence and anti-Fascist sentiments of World War II led to the rise of the Progressive Movement in cultural circles. Progressive writers who incorporated opposition to capitalism and feudalism in their anti-imperialist and anti-Fascist stance came together to form a Progressive Writers Association. In 1943, the Indian People's Theatre (IPTA) was born as its theatre counterpart. For the first time writers and artists concerned themselves with problems of hunger, poverty, social backwardness and political subjugation. Institutions and customs were critically examined in the light of reason and often in the context of class relationships. In its initial years, however, IPTA did not spawn any revolutionary art because of its insulation from the rural poor and the local languages of its members, most of whom were urban middle-class intellectuals. But over a period of time, IPTA's base broadened and writers and performers from the urban lower classes wrote about the rural milieu from personal experience. Audiences also came to include the rural masses.[10]

By virtue of being a protest movement, IPTA changed not only the content but also the structure and conception of theatre in India. By performing for the masses rather than for limited audiences it made theatre more readily available to a section of society which had previously either ignored it or been prevented from seeing it. By drawing on local dialects and folk theatre forms such as the *Jatra* of Bengal, the *Tamasha* of Maharashtra and the *Burra Katha* of Andhra Pradesh, it changed the structure and the staging of plays. Conventional prosceniums and costly props and stage effects were no longer considered necessary; a new theatre convention and idiom were forged. Translations and adaptations of Brecht became a popular choice for raising social consciousness and this continues to be so today.[11]

Again, much more than in any other part of India, this new dramatic movement took root in Bengal. One of the best works of those years was Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (New Harvest). Produced in 1944, it is a landmark not only as protest theatre, but also in Indian drama as a whole. The subject of the play was the death of five million peasants during the Bengal famine of 1943–44, a tragedy of horrendous proportions made doubly so because it was a man-made product of official incompetence, callousness and human greed. Radical in content and innovative in its use of language and stage craft, this play created history when, in March 1945, it was performed before seven thousand people. *Nabanna* articulated all the anger felt by the people against a corrupt establishment and grasping humanity. It set a trend and inspired a number of playwrights to convey the miseries of the poor and the dispossessed. Bhattacharya

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himself wrote other plays developing such themes as the oppression of the landless peasants. None of these plays were doctrinaire or tied to any party line. They went beyond propaganda and are today regarded as theatre of the highest quality. The same was not true of the spate of political plays produced all over India by the Progressive Movement, which slowly petered out in the 1950s.[12]

When the initial euphoria of Independence wore off, it became clear that all of India's problems had not faded away with the achievement of freedom. By the middle of the sixties, India was facing a severe economic crisis, with food imports and food prices at a new high, a slowing of industrial production in the aftermath of the Indo-Pak War of 1965, and an unemployment high peaking at twelve million. The political system too began to show strains. The era of Congress supremacy was drawing to a close; in 1957 it had lost the elections to the Communist Party in the state of Kerala. Though that government was dismissed and President's rule invoked in 1959, the Congress lost the majority in eight states in the general elections of 1967. Thus, a period of political instability was ushered in, with different parties in power at the Federal and State level. This period also marked the rise of regional parties in the states. The parties themselves began to have internal troubles. The Congress split in two in 1969 and the Communist Party of India (CPI), which had split into the CPI and the CPI-Marxist (CPI-M) in 1964, split again into CPI-M and CPI–Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML). Later, the declaration of Emergency by Mrs Gandhi in 1975 when civil rights were suspended, the secessionist movement in Punjab, Assam and some of the North-Eastern border states, Mrs Gandhi's assassination in 1984 and its aftermath—all contributed to a very turbulent political situation.

Nor were things any better on the social front. Though the Constitution and subsequent ameliorative legislation had promised equality of opportunity and equality before law to all irrespective of religion, race, caste, sex or creed, in practice the gap between the rich and the poor had not narrowed. Communal riots were endemic, the untouchables still suffered from economic and social disabilities and, in spite of land reform legislation the peasant's dream of land, a fair share of the produce, and fair wages still seemed a distant dream.

Though the Mahatma had brought women out of *purdah* and the kitchen to participate in national activity, the Committee on Status of Women, reporting in 1975, found that, "Large masses of women in this country have remained unaffected by the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution and the law enacted since Independence." If one set of disabilities had been removed through legislation (*sati,* child marriage, female infanticide, prohibition of widow remarriage and *purdah*, in varying degrees), others had taken their place. Female literacy was still

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half that of men, nearly 40 per cent of unemployment was accounted for by women, their share in unemployment being higher than their share in the labour force, and there was also wage discrimination. Dowry deaths were on the increase in spite of anti-dowry legislation and the incidence of rape and violence against women was rising. Poor and especially low caste women faced sexual exploitation from employers, landlords and high caste men in rural areas.

Thus, cause for protest has not disappeared, but in constrast to the pre-Independence period, theatre-based political expression since the sixties has tended, though not exclusively, to be strongly oriented towards formal political ideology. Social protest has been couched in terms of power relationships. Bengal still leads in political theatre but has been joined by the regional theatres of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, because it is in these states that differing political ideologies rival for power. Marathi and Hindi theatre have contributed more to social protest.

That Bengal leads in political theatre is no surprise given its political and economic condition and its theatrical tradition. In the sixties, political theatre became the preoccupation of a number of professional groups and playwrights; no sensitive, committed artist could ignore the misery, apathy and political turmoil in Bengal. The fourth most populous state in India, its literacy rate is higher than the national average. The disintegration of the peasantry which accompanied the early stages of British rule all over India has been most acute in Bengal, leading to large-scale migration to Calcutta in search of jobs. But while the workforce is largely Bengali, the manufacturing capital being in non-Bengali hands is a cause for tension. Several famines, the Partition of 1947, the refugee influx then and after the creation of Bangladesh have shattered Bengal's economy. Its internal resources are inadequate for the task of reconstruction. The Centre allegedly discriminates against Bengal in giving financial aid. And finally, Calcutta itself is both an asset and a liability. One of the most densely populated cities in the world, almost a third of its people live in some of the worst slums ever found, or on the city's pavements. Many are jobless and unemployed; schools and colleges are overcrowded; the transport system is chaotic and inadequate; and the wages of factory workers almost the lowest in India. On the other hand, it also has a large middle-class intelligentsia which has grown disillusioned with the political infighting, and the resulting murders, strikes and dislocation of life.

Most of the plays protesting against these conditions have, however, been of doubtful theatrical worth, the exceptions being the work of Utpal Dutt and Badal Sircar. Though Shombhu Mitra and his group, *Bohurupee*, have produced first-class theatre exhibiting deep social commitment, their plays are less explicitly protest plays than those of

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the other two. Sircar and Dutt subscribe to differing political ideologies and political strategies. They also have different approaches to theatre. Their work and their differences have been incisively analysed in Rustom Bharucha's *Rehearsals of Revolution—The Political Theatre of Bengal*, (1978). It is sufficient for our purpose to note that Dutt adheres to Marxist-Leninist precepts and believes that theatre must do more than merely expose injustice and exploitation; it must also lead to revolution. Sircar does not subscribe to any political ideologies nor seeks revolutionary solutions. One works on an epic scale and does not hesitate to use the conventions of the commercial theatre in order to draw attention; the other prefers to work intimately for greater impact and uses spartan productions to make theatre available, either free or cheaply, to the masses.

Dutt's *Angar* (Coal, 1959), *Kallol* (Sound of the Waves, 1965), *Din Badaler Pala* (Song of the Changing Times), and *Barricade* are some of his best-known protest plays, dealing with the exploitation of coalminers, the repressive administration of the Congress Party, and the plight of individuals caught in a vicious political system, respectively. In *Dushapaner Nagri* (City of Nightmares), Dutt presents a vision of terrorism and police brutality in Calcutta. The play was banned on charge of sedition, but before that it was attacked by the Congress supporters. In the meantime, the Emergency was declared and all political theatre was more or less suppressed. It put out of action many groups struggling to establish a theatre of commitment.[13]

Sircar's *Spartacus* (1972) is about the slave revolt led by Spartacus in 71 BC and its eventual suppression by the representatives of the Roman Empire. The audience is left to draw a parallel between the historical event and contemporary life by the focus on the essence of slavery. *Michil* (Procession) is a political satire on life in Calcutta with its political murders, rising prices, deterioration of public transport, postponement of examinations, blackmarketing in essential products, endless processions, political ineptness and corruption. It is a condemnation of the apathy and smugness of the middle class. A play which stands as a landmark not only for its contribution to protest theatre, but also for its artistic values is *Bhoma*. the title refers to a villager from the poor and marshy Sunderbans who comes to Calcutta in search of food and a job. *Bhoma* confronts the dichotomy between the urban and rural life in India and makes its audience recognise its indifference and callousness to the many Bhomas of Calcutta.

Most of the political theatre in Bengal is based in Calcutta, the one notable exception being Prabir Guha's Living Theatre of Kharda, a group of lower middle-class actors. Though not committed to any particular ideology, they try to change the structure of society by raising conscious-

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ness. Again, political theatre is largely performed by the middle- or lower-class intellectuals, *for* the middle class or *for* the oppressed. Bengal's protest theatre is yet to be performed by the disadvantaged.

The protest theatre in Kerala is, however, much more broad-based, both geographically and in terms of class-caste partly because Kerala does not have sharp rural-urban divide characteristic of most other regions, and partly because of its high literacy rate, the highest in India. Caste oppression by the higher castes who were also the landed classes was, perhaps, the worst in Kerala and made it easy for Communism to use this double-edged oppression to its propaganda advantage. High political consciousness (the result of education and grassroot party work) coupled with a large pool of the educated unemployed and a weak Congress base enabled Communism to take root and for the Party to rule Kerala, either singly or in coalition, from the time it first came to power in 1957 to the present day. This high political consciousness is reflected in a very active street theatre on social and political issues. The political parties too have used theatre for political propaganda, retaining commercial troupes for their purpose. But unlike Bengal, very few of these protest plays have any pretensions to artistic standards or literary merit, perhaps, the one exception being the play, *You Made Me a Communist*. Written by Bhaskara Pillai and produced by the Kerala People's Art Club, the four-hour-long drama revolves around the story of a pauperised landlord family, and the process of transformation of the old father, steeped in feudal illusions, superstitions and cynicism into a Communist, protesting against tyranny and oppression.

In Andhra Pradesh there was a brief spurt of political theatre in the late forties and fifties, especially in the Telangana region, focussing on the twin issues of a separate Telugu-speaking state and the oppression of Telangana's land-hungry peasantry. Again, it was the Communist parties which made most use of the popular folk form, the *Burra Katha*, for agitprop theatre. Protest theatre is not a significant genre in Andhra anymore.

In Tamil Nadu, protest was directed specifically against Brahman domination. Starting as a social protest movement, it soon gained political dimensions in the shape of the Dravida Munnetra Kazagam Party (DMK), which later split to form the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (AIADMK) as a second party. In the post-1967 period the two DMK parties offered a regional alternative to the Congress. As in West Bengal, bitter political infighting between the two DMKs has influenced the political and, with it, the cultural life of the State to such an extent that it is alleged one can speak of Congress literature, DMK literature and so on. Drama in particular has been harnessed by the DMK parties for political propaganda, but again literary and aesthetic standards are low.

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As has already been noted, what is called protest theatre in the different regions of India is theatre for raising the consciousness of the middle-class intelligentsia or the oppressed poor; seldom is it theatre performed *by* the disadvantaged. Almost the only exception to this is the Dalit theatre of Maharashtra, typified by such groups as the Dalit Rangabhoomi of Pune. Dalits are former untouchables who under the leadership of Dr B.R. Ambedkar became converts to Buddhism. The Dalit movement began in 1927, originally as a literary movement to awaken the Dalits to their rights; later, however, it gained a political dimension. Literary and political protest merged in the form of theatre, and now the Dalit theatre serves both as a vehicle of creative expression for a much-denied people, as well as a conscientisation exercise and a political statement. Judged by traditional aesthetic standards it is yet to reach literary or theatrical heights but it is undoubtedly an important form of protest and deserves encouragement.

The use of theatre by women in recent years falls in the same category. In India, women's rights have traditionally been championed by enlightened men. In the late 1970s and 1980s, however, the modern women's movement emerged, and particularly in metropolitan cities, it began to use the street theatre in public places to bring women's issues to the fore. Short episodic plays on themes such as rape, violence against women, dowry deaths and police brutality were enacted by women's groups before college audiences, office staff and the general public in parks. *Mulgi Zhali Ho* (A Girl is Born), written by Joti Mhapsekar and produced by the Bombay women's group, *Stree Mukti Sangathan,* in the early eighties, focusses on the consternation that greets the birth of a baby girl in India. It is one of the few full-length plays to be produced that takes up women's issues. It proved a great hit all over India, though it is yet to be considered a part of mainstream theatre. Apart from the role it has played in forging solidarity among women, women's theatre is significant because it signals an increased self-confidence among Indian women, after years of suppression and submission. That they can publicly perform in plays dealing with issues such as rape is indeed a great step forward.

It would be inappropriate to end this survey of Indian protest theatre without mentioning the plays of Vijay Tendulkar. They have taken the Marathi theatre, always in the vanguard of social protest, to new heights. Rather than protest against specific social evils, as his predecessors had done, his plays like *Sakharam Binder, Ghasiram Kotwal,* and *Shantata, Court Chalu Ahe* (Silence, the Court is in Session), protest against the middle-class morality and conventional outlook. Not surprisingly, they have moved the conservative elements to criticism.

The foregoing survey highlights some of the conditions necessary

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for protest theatre to develop, and explains why it develops in certain periods and in certain regions rather than in others. The first condition is, of course, the presence of important political and social issues which agitate society at any given time or place and which call forth protests from thoughtful individuals. The established order, political or social, is perceived to need fundamental change and to bring forth this change is the challenge of protest theatre. In the pre-Independence period, the focus of protest was an alien government and also the injustices perpetrated by a dominant element of society—the Brahmans; in modern India, it is severe economic distress coupled with political corruption and ineptitude.

Secondly, it is clear that protest theatre develops in those regions where political and economic conditions are the worst and change most desperately needed, though it is not necessary that every severely deprived region will develop a protest theatre. Other necessary preconditions are that (a) through education both political consciousness and literary attainments are high; (b) there are differing political ideologies vying for power; and (c) a strong theatrical tradition exists. Protest through theatre also develops where there is the prevalence of an oral rather than a written tradition so that performance is more effective than the written word. It is also a more effective means of communication where there are few alternative means of entertainment or where they are more costly, because then free or cheap theatre draws huge audiences.

In India, with very few exceptions, protest through the theatre has largely been an urban phenomenon, used by the middle-class intelligentsia mostly for middle-class consumption when performed in proscenium theatres, but with a widening of the class base when performed as street plays or in open spaces. Theatre groups and developmental agencies are increasingly turning to theatre as a tool for conscientisation among the disadvantaged, and in this effort try to involve the disadvantaged themselves in performance, but these efforts are as yet far from becoming significant protest theatre where the initiative comes from those most affected. The Dalit theatre remains as yet the only example of *suo moto* protest by the oppressed.

This survey highlights once again what has been borne out by the experience of other countries—that protest cannot be extinguished by censorship alone. Man's ingenuity finds yet more creative ways to flout authority. Unfortunately, the survey also shows that there is a limit beyond which the creative impulse cannot flourish. Censorship, coupled with severe repression, has frequently taken its toll on protest through theatre.

The Indian experience also raises the question whether protest theatre is incompatible with high literary standards and theatrical values, and whether it is doomed to remain as theatre of the agitprop variety.

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The answer seems to be, not necessarily so. The works of Utpal Dutt, Badal Sircar, Bijon Bhattacharya and Tendulkar indicate that protest theatre can be good theatre, provided it attracts writers, producers and actors of calibre, and conversely, good theatre can be effective as protest if it is made widely accessible to the masses at very low cost. This boils down, in part at least, to a question of economics.

As for the question of desired impacts, whether it has, in fact, led to political and social change, the answer is that it is difficult to ascertain how much is due to protest theatre alone. But, undeniably, it has played a role. It helped to awaken nationalism in British India and to politicise the masses in modern India. It may not have led to revolutionary action, but this could be, as a leading political commentator has observed, because India lacks a revolutionary tradition.[14]

Finally, it is difficult to gauge whether there is more or less protest through theatre in India than elsewhere in the world. Perhaps, compared to the magnitude of change required, it is not enough, either in quantity or in its impact. But that it is there at all and allowed freely speaks well for the Indian democracy. Though no doubt dissent has been punished by the Establishment, even in free India, it is more the exception than the rule. Only in exceptional times, like the Emergency in 1975, was the censorship severe enough to seriously disrupt political protest through theatre, and invariably every attempt at censorship has been vociferously protested in the press and by intellectuals.

As for social protest, except for some attacks on Tendulkar by the conventional sections of society for some of his more "daring" plays, there has been little Government censorship or hostile reaction from the community. Compared to the rigours and violence of censorship in Latin America, the Philippines at the time of Marcos, or Indonesia, protest has been possible in India and censorship has been circumvented, to some extent, by ingenuity. In fact, a far greater danger is self-censorship, particularly as non-commercial groups operate on a shoestring budget, and many of their members work full time elsewhere. Members of such groups can ill afford to lose their jobs or their members, or to fold up as a theatre group. They may, thus, have little inclination to experiment or take risks. Again it boils down to a question of economics.□

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